

# The Ecclesiological Significance of Bad Popes

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In my last article, "Priestly Ministry or Hierarchy: The Sacrament of Order", I surveyed the history of the second plank of the ultramontane platform of magisterial papalism; namely hierarchical clericalism. Now we must examine the roots of the chief item of this distorted ecclesial ideology, the concentration of all authority in the papal institution. For this purpose Church history divides fairly neatly into two halves, the first millennium and the second millennium of our era.

The first millennium, we could say, saw the gradual development of the doctrine of the universal primacy of the Roman Church and its bishop in the *Catholica*, such as it was eventually defined, together with the doctrine of papal infallibility, in 1870. The dogmatic constitution *Pastor Aeternus* of Vatican I, could have been promulgated (with some modifications to language and style which would chiefly have been improvements) by any pope from Leo the Great (ob. 461) to Gregory the Great (ob. 603), without anyone in Rome or the West thinking it very unusual, though there would no doubt have been demurrers from the East. But the practice of Eastern bishops, throughout the Arian and then the christological controversies that raged in the 4th and 5th centuries, shows that in fact they accepted the unique position of the Roman Church as the touchstone of orthodox faith. Rome was never heretical.

The earliest witness to this unique position of the Roman Church is Ignatius of Antioch (ob. 109), who also, curiously enough, provides by his silence strong though not conclusive evidence that the Church of Rome had not yet evolved a monarchical episcopate — that there was as yet no such person as a 'bishop of Rome'. Further illustrations occur at more or less regular intervals through the early centuries, usually controversies where the issue is finally decided on the strength of the Roman tradition: the proper way of celebrating Easter under bishop Victor (ob. 198) as against the Quartodecimans of Asia; the first hints of the sacrament of penance under Callistus (ob. 220) as against the Montanists, Tertullian and Hippolytus; the validity of heretical baptism under Stephen (ob. 256) as against the African tradition of St Cyprian which later led into the Donatist schism. Finally this unique position of the Roman Church, now for all practical purposes identi-

fied with the Roman bishop, receives canonical recognition and formulation at the Council of Sardica (Sophia) in 342 or 343. This was not an ecumenical council, and its canons were not, as such, universally accepted. But those which established a procedure for final appeal to what from now on is often simply called the Apostolic See were later quoted by some as being canons of Nicaea (325), and as such reaffirmed by subsequent ecumenical councils.

But throughout these first three and a half centuries there was not the slightest suggestion of the Roman See actually *governing* other Churches, legislating for them, limiting their own jurisdiction, appointing their bishops and so on. It is probable that the bishop of Rome did exercise a kind of metropolitan authority over the neighbouring Italian sees, which came to be known as 'suburbicarian sees', even at this early date. But as far as I know there is less evidence for this than there is for the clearly 'sovereign' authority enjoyed by the see of Alexandria over all the Churches of Egypt and Cyrenaica.

These, in any case, were simply particular instances of the development of synodal government in the *Catholica*. The bishops of a province, or of several provinces in one area, e.g. Africa, Spain, Italy south of the Rubicon, and so on, met regularly in provincial synods, and if there was one obviously major see in the area, like Carthage in Africa (or Rome in Italy) its bishop became the permanent chairman of the synod, with great authority; and since he would certainly have a more numerous clergy at his disposal than smaller country town sees, he would often be asked to provide these smaller Churches with a bishop whenever there was a vacancy. Thus one of the more important institutions which became a kind of vehicle for the expression of papal authority was the regular, at times, I believe annual, Roman synod attended by the bishops of the suburbicarian province.

The Roman jurisdiction began to extend further than this, no doubt as a result of the canons of Sardica, towards the end of the 4th century. Rescripts from the Apostolic See, modelled on the imperial rescripts from the emperor's court, were sent in reply to queries, complaints, suits from other Churches, mainly in Italy, Spain, Gaul and Illyricum (occasionally Africa), and these laid the foundations of a body of papal case law. The popes were not, I think, claiming to legislate, but to apply and interpret the existing canons of councils.

With Leo the Great (440-461) we get a pope who began systematically to formulate a theory of his authority, of his *plena potestas* as he called it, as coming to him as the heir of St Peter. With Gregory the Great (590-603) we get the beginning of a considerable extension in the actual power of the Holy See, with the mis-

sionary expansion of the Church in northern Europe, which he inaugurated with his mission of Augustine to England. The new Churches looked directly to Rome as their founder and mother Church, and sought and received direct instructions, and the confirmation, sometimes the appointment, of their bishops from Rome. In this they differed from the Irish Church and its daughters both in Scotland and on the Continent, for St Patrick had received his mission, his authorisation, from Gaul and not from Rome.

But although the actual jurisdiction of the Roman Church, or Apostolic See, was thus steadily expanding, we have to realise that it was very occasional and intermittent in its exercise. It cannot at all be said that other Churches depended on it for their proper and normal functioning. Even with strong popes like Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, Nicholas the Great (858-867), there was no such thing as a central government of the Church. There were neither the communications to make it possible, nor the apparatus, nor the need. The Catholic Church was not in constitutional appearance like a centralised absolute monarchy (like the Roman Empire or its Byzantine continuation, for example), but like a very loose and unsystematic federation of local Churches, which were themselves synodal 'federations' of monarchical sees.

And so when from time to time and for various reasons the Roman see fell into disarray, and even when from the late 9th to the middle 11th centuries it suffered almost 200 years of truly scandalous degradation and decline (though not all its occupants even in this period were 'bad popes'), the other Churches outside Italy were not seriously affected by this unfortunate state of affairs. It was, for example, a period of vigorous revival and reform in the Anglo-Saxon Church.

With the 11th century we get a radical change in direction with what are usually called the Hildebrandine or Gregorian reforms after the monk Hildebrand who became Gregory VII (1073-1085). The background to these was the reform both of the papacy itself and of the Church in Germany that had been undertaken by the German Emperors in the first half of the 11th century. The reforms were first and foremost aimed at freeing ecclesiastical appointments from lay control. They led directly to what are called the Wars of Investiture which intermittently occupied the 12th and 13th centuries. Freedom of the Church (meaning the hierarchy of pope and bishops) from the control of lay princes was the issue.

Neither of the chief protagonists, pope and emperor, really won the battle. Some of the lesser lay rulers, like the kings of England and above all of France, achieved substantial gains from it. But the real losers, it seems to me, were the local Churches, and

indeed the very concept of local Church. The concept indeed survived, much weakened. But the reality of an autonomous local Church, responsible for the quality and vigour of its own Christian life, had more or less faded away by the middle of the 13th century. Bishops were either agents of the state, of the secular rulers, and their Churches an element in the complex feudal structure of society; or when the pendulum of conflict swung the other way, they were agents and legates of the Holy See, and their Churches provided emoluments in the form of benefices for the officials of the Roman curia, or when the pendulum came eventually to rest more or less in the middle – both.

In the 12th century and up to the pontificate of Innocent III (1198-1216) the papacy, on the whole, was the spear-head of reform. Its chief instruments for reform were an expanded and efficiently organised curia, a vigorous canonical jurisprudence, and the ancient institution of the Roman synod, now expanded at fairly frequent intervals into a general council of the Latin Church. The most famous and important of these councils was Lateran IV, 1215. What it all added up to was a rapid centralisation of authority and ecclesiastical power in Rome – up to 1216 and a little after, as I have said, in the interests of authentic ecclesiastical reform.

But from the reign of Innocent IV onwards (1243-1254) this ceased to be the case. The papacy's pretensions – and as set forth in the *Dictatus Papae* of Gregory VII or the bull *Unam Sanctam* of Boniface VIII (1294-1303) they were extreme, absolute and unlimited – were not matched by adequate real financial or political power. This lack could only be supplied in a myriad little ways by financial and political chicanery. From then on the over-centralised papacy became one of the chief obstacles (and a permanent obstacle) to Church reform and the stage of a series of large-scale scandals. First, there was the 70 years absence of the papacy from Rome in the papal territory of Avignon, the popes more or less in the pocket of the kings of France (1307-1377). At least, all the popes of this period were Frenchmen.

This “Babylonian captivity”, not in itself absolutely scandalous but, as it were, cumulatively so, was immediately followed by the thumping scandal of the Great Schism which lasted almost 40 years (1378-1417). There is an appropriate biblical ring about these tallies of dark years. The continuous cry during these periods was for “Reform of the Church in head and members”. It was the heyday of the conciliarist movement, in opposition to the extreme papalism of the curia which had evidently landed the Church in this mess. And it was eventually a general council, that of Constance, 1415-1418, which put an end to the Great Schism.

But the weakness of mediaeval conciliarism was that it took for granted without question the actual achievement of mediaeval papalism, namely the centralisation of authority and the concept of the universal "Catholic and Roman Church" as one administrative unit (in effect the Latin Church) replacing the concept of many local Churches as a variety of administrative units, constituting the universal Catholic Church, with the local Roman Church as their focal point. So the conciliarists in their moment of triumph at Constance tried to set up a central conciliar government, like a central parliamentary system, to balance the central executive of the Roman curia, with the requirement of regular councils.

This attempt did not even need the hostility of the Roman curia to kill it dead; it soon collapsed under its own top-heaviness. But on the other hand the Roman curia, the papacy, failed yet again to reform itself or initiate the reform of the Church at large. Instead it sank, in the second half of the 15th century, into the most notorious of the episodes of papal scandal, the 'bad popes' of the Renaissance, Alexander VI and all that.

The really scandalous ones, I suppose, were no more than five in number from 1471 to 1521, Sixtus IV, Innocent VIII, Alexander VI, Julius II and Leo X. The essence of their scandalousness was that they treated the papacy first and foremost as an Italian principedom, which the rest of the Church was just conveniently there, more or less, to prop up.

So what have we now? We have had runs of bad popes before, some of them very bad indeed, in the 9th to the 11th centuries. But in that period the Church was not centralised in government; it was a Church of Churches which suffered no general damage from the degradation of the Roman Church. Now, however, it is highly centralised, no longer a Church of Churches, but a Roman Church and its extensions. So the corruption spreads from what is now the centre of an over-centralised institution. The corruption of Leo X, for example, is reflected in the corruption of Cardinal Wolsey in England or Cardinal Beaton in Scotland. The whole Church is paralysed in its 'members' by the inability of its 'head' to reform itself. This language of head and members is an accurate *description* of the mediaeval Church, but represents a very debased *ecclesiology*, extrapolated from the administrative organisation of that Church — an organisation that was sick from top to bottom. "The whole head is sick, the whole heart grown faint; from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head there is not a sound spot; wounds, bruises, open sores, not dressed, not bandaged, not soothed with oil" (Isai. 1: 5-6).

So when the reform came — as it was bound to come sooner or later, since what we are dealing with, after all, is the Church of

Jesus Christ, the new people of God – when it came after rather more than two centuries of frustration by the papacy, it is not surprising that it came without the papacy and against the papacy, in schism from the Roman Church, and bringing with it heresy. For, to use a modern terminology, the orthopraxy of the Roman Church in its most august representatives was so glaringly and continuously lacking, that many good and earnest Christians could no longer credit the Roman Church's most ancient claim to pre-eminence and most indispensable function, of being the touchstone of orthodoxy. These Christians became Protestants, and substituted scripture as the touchstone of orthodoxy – which was a categorical mistake of the first water, as the subsequent history of Protestantism has shown.

What then are the useful theological lessons to be learned from 'bad popes'? We may list them as follows:

- 1 They represent the inevitable nemesis of inflated pretensions to absolute and unlimited, non-responsible authority (the magisterial papalist misinterpretation of *plena potestas*). You could say they are history's (or God's) *reductio ad absurdum* of such human hubris in the Church of him who came not to be served but to serve. *All* human authority has strict ontological and therefore moral limits, and if these limits are not given institutional expression, that authority too easily becomes demonic.
- 2 A comparison of our two sets of 'bad popes', 9th to 11th centuries and 14th to 16th, shows that an ecclesiology which envisages the Church as *one* administrative organism, a concentric extension outwards from the Roman centre, instead of as a Church of Churches, all communicating with the Roman Church, is very dangerous to the Church's health, and in adverse circumstances makes the reform that is always necessary (*ecclesia semper reformanda*) more difficult, and sometimes impossible.
- 3 They show that the *government* of the universal Church by the Roman Church, which is not really necessary, and indeed not effectively possible, seriously distracts the Roman Church and its bishop, the pope, from their one all-important and essential function of being the touchstone of orthodoxy and true faith. As Catholics we believe that the popes and the Roman Church of which they are bishops have never lost this function or ceased to perform it. But the distractions of power which they have unnecessarily assumed, and continue to grasp at, to treat as a *harpagmos* (Phil. 2: 6) have all too often disturbed this function, and rendered their performance of it exceedingly opaque.

While we still have good popes, then, let them allow the local Churches to govern themselves, to make their own laws and work out their own discipline, to find their own bishops – why ever not? Let them severely clip the wings of their grossly inflated central organisation, the Roman curia, and recast its functions so that it becomes a series of advisory resource centres instead of a system of administrative, executive and legislative organs. And let them concentrate on preserving and communicating to other Churches both the orthodoxy and the orthopraxy of the Roman Church, i.e. the Christian community in Rome.

Otherwise, I fear, God (or history) may once more send us a scourge of bad popes.

## Reviews

**ALBERTUS MAGNUS DOCTOR UNIVERSALIS 1280-1980.** Ed. G Meyer & A Zimmermann. *Grünewald*. 1980 pp 534 DM 64.

**ALBERTUS MAGNUS AND THE SCIENCES.** Ed. J A Weisheipl. *P.I.M.S.* (Toronto). 1980. pp xiv + 658. \$35.

The seventh centenary of St Albert's death has provoked two magnificent collections of essays, which show that interest in this medieval Dominican polymath is as lively as ever,

The German *Festschrift* is the more comprehensive and varied, containing articles in German, French and English on many facets of Albert's work. As the editors point out, Albert-scholarship is not sufficiently advanced to make it possible to present an all-round and authoritative picture of the saint's achievements; accordingly they have preferred to invite scholars to contribute essays on some of the issues involved, with a view to advancing and encouraging research into his work and significance. The result, inevitably, does not make easy reading. Very different specialist fields of study come together, and it is unlikely that any one reader will find all the contributions equally rewarding. Some of the essays are primarily concerned with particular historical topics, and it is worth remarking that several of these deal not just with Albert but with the later history of his influence, and, in one case, of his

manuscripts. Albert Fries very usefully attempts to sort out the chronology of Albert's scripture commentaries, and also tries to identify some of the Sequences which might plausibly be identified as those which Albert, according to the ancient catalogues, composed (this last being a valuable pioneering effort). Zimmermann tries to determine the extent to which there really was an Averroist school in the 13th century, and Albert's relationship to it. Weisheipl sifts the evidence for the axiom *Opus naturae est opus intelligentiae*, and concludes that it is in fact Albert's own, and that it is early.

As we should expect, a great many of the articles are devoted to Albert's scientific writings, and these particularly help to clarify his method. William Wallace, in an essay specifically on his scientific methodology, claims that in important ways he is more "modern" than has sometimes been supposed, and, in particular, that he is more central to the development towards modern science than Bacon and Grosse-teste. He also argues (in two articles, one in each of the two books under review)